

The Blood of the Covenant  
Exodus 24:1-8  
8/11/2013

A wedding ceremony has a certain amount of drama to it. There is a formality about it. It is a solemn occasion. People wear the very finest clothes. They have grand music, often played on the pipe organ. There is a procession, and vows and rings are exchanged. Those rings are the sign of the marriage covenant. A person can immediately be recognized as a married person if there is a ring on the fourth finger of their left hand. The vows are vows of exclusive devotion one to the other. The kiss at the end is the seal of the ceremony. A wedding is a covenant ceremony. It is based on a relationship between a man and a woman. The covenant itself is a solemn agreement between the man and the woman that is exclusive: no other person will have the same closeness as the spouse will. In many and various ways, this picture of a wedding ceremony as a covenantal ceremony helps us understand what our passage is all about, and will help us understand how to apply the passage to our own lives.

This passage is all about a covenantal ceremony. There is a solemnity about it. There is a drama about it that is not the same as every other worship service we see in the Bible, though this is certainly also a worship service. There is a procession up a mountain. There is a vow spoken. There is a sign and seal of the covenant. There is a cutting of an animal. After all, covenants are said to be “cut” not “made.” You don’t “make” a covenant, you “cut” a covenant. Remember the animals of Abraham’s covenant in Genesis 15? Abraham cut the pieces, and the Lord passed through the pieces, saying in effect that if the covenant fell to the ground, then God Himself would be cut up in pieces like the animals. For the Israelites witnessing and experiencing this covenant, it would be unforgettable for anyone who had gone through it, and had the blood sprinkled on him. It is a beautiful picture of the new covenant in Christ’s blood that He has sprinkled for our benefit, and which tells us about how God saves us by the one and only sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

The scene starts with a call to worship. God calls the people to worship in verse 1. It is always God who calls His people to worship. We do not decide in and of ourselves to go before God and offer Him worship in any way we desire. We must be called to worship. That worship God has called us to do one day in seven, on Sunday. God called the elders, who were the representatives, to go up the mountain. In the same way, God does not call us to worship Him merely on earth. He calls us up as well: by faith we join the heavenly chorus that drowns out all music but its own, as the hymn puts it. We worship not only in our particular location, but also in heaven itself, by faith. That is what the old liturgy means when it says “lift up your hearts,” “we lift them up to the Lord.” It is called the “sursum corda,” which means the lifting up of the heart. Those words do not mean simply “have an uplifting experience.” They mean “direct your hearts to heaven where God is.” It is one reason the Old Testament so often had worship on a mountain. It was up. That was to point us to the fact that worship is a vertical thing. It directs us up to God.

As we have noted, however, this is a special worship service, a covenantal worship service. We notice that Moses alone is supposed to go near the Lord. Only the Mediator can do that. The people cannot come near the Lord God, because of sin. Through our great Mediator, Jesus Christ, we have been brought near by the blood of the Lamb, we who once were far off. More about that later.

The next element in the worship service was the reading of God’s word, as we see in verse 3. Most likely this was not simply repeating the words that God had related, but also

explaining what they meant, and how they applied. In other words, Moses preached to the people.

The people respond a bit optimistically, don't you think? They are very unified (they speak with "one voice"), they are very emphatic, and they are very confident that they can do everything that the Lord has commanded them. Really? It is only 9 chapters before the golden calf, wherein they throw out everything they heard from God through Moses. However, here they really have no choice but to say what they said. But they make a huge promise, since everything the Lord had said included the Ten Commandments, and all the laws in between chapter 20 and chapter 24. That covers a lot of territory!

Notice that Moses does not take the people's word for it that they will remember. Moses writes everything down. This was typical of covenantal agreements in those days. The agreement had to be put in writing. Moses therefore writes down all the words of the Lord that the people had said they would do. If there is a dispute about the words of the Lord, about what God had actually said, they could always go back and look at the writings, and see if that was what the Lord had actually said. Having it written down is for the benefit of our very short memories. Not only are we creatures, and prone to forgetfulness, but we are also sinners, which makes us doubly forgetful of what God has commanded us. Therefore, we need reminding of what God has said.

Next we see the sign of the covenant, the twelve pillars. This was a visible representation of the people of Israel to their God. These pillars would have been set next to the altar, as a way of saying that here is where God and His people meet together.

That brings us to the sacrifice. There can be no worship at all without sacrifice. This is because only people who have been cleansed of their sin can approach God and expect to get anywhere near Him. Remember what the Psalmist says? Who can ascend the holy hill of the Lord? Only those with clean hands and a pure heart. This is why it is so wrong-headed to gear our worship entirely towards non-believers. Worship is not for non-believers. They have not been cleansed. They have no sacrifice for sins. They have no clean hands and pure heart. And if, as we have already seen, worship is primarily a vertical thing, then modern attempts to pander to the world do nothing except erase the vertical aspect almost entirely, and make worship a social club. No: worship cannot happen without a sacrifice. In this particular case, two offerings were presented to the Lord: the burnt offering and the peace offering. These two offerings show us two aspects of the work of Jesus Christ. The burnt offering was something that was completely given to God. The whole animal was burnt, as Leviticus 1 tells us. All of it belonged to God. That is what Jesus did. He offered up to His Father everything that He was, and everything that He had done. It was all for the glory of God. The second offering is the peace offering. This offering shows us that when Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins, He brought about reconciliation between God and man. His sacrifice brought about peace between us and God. We cannot worship God if we are at war with him, as all unbelievers are.

The last major event of this covenant ceremony is the sprinkling of blood in two places: the first place is the altar, and the second place is the people. We might ask the question: why was it necessary to sprinkle the blood in both of those places? Well, the altar always represents God in the Old Testament. In particular, it represents God forgiving sins because of a bloody sacrifice. What is offered on the altar is offered to God. The blood of the sacrifice is therefore offered up to God when it is sprinkled on the altar. Moses took the branch of the hyssop plant, dipped it in the blood of the sacrificed animals, and sprinkled that blood on the

altar. That is what he did with half of the blood. The other half of the blood was sprinkled on the people. This meant several things. First of all, it meant that this was a very solemn occasion, a life or death ceremony! We remember from Leviticus 17 that the life of the flesh is in the blood. The people are being vividly reminded that they cannot approach anywhere close to God without a sacrifice for their sins. The blood is what connects the people to God. It connects the people to the altar. I well remember one of my pastors telling the congregation about one of his professors in seminary who always used to say, "Make much of the blood, make much of the blood." It is a subject that most people would rather avoid. They don't want to talk about blood, because the whole idea of a sacrifice is hideous to them. Nevertheless, we must make much of the blood, for without the life and death of our Lord Jesus Christ, we could not be brought near to God. Moses calls this blood "the blood of the covenant."

That brings us to two very important passages in the New Testament to which this passage points. The first is the account of the Lord's Supper, where Jesus says, "This cup is the cup of the new covenant of my blood." Moses said the blood of the goat and oxen is the blood of the covenant. Jesus says this cup in the Lord's Supper is the cup of the new covenant in His blood, which is shed for the forgiveness of sins.

However, the new covenant is based on an eternal covenant. In Hebrews 13, in the benediction which I often use at the end of the service, and will be using today, the phrase occurs in that passage: "by the blood of the eternal covenant." This everlasting covenant cannot refer to any covenant made in time between God and His people. It refers to the agreement made between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in all eternity past, which was finally sealed in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In that eternal agreement, each person of the Trinity spoke what they would do in the salvation of the people of God. Charles Spurgeon, in his sermon on Hebrews 13, beautifully imagines what those words might have been. I will give you Spurgeon's words, slightly updated for modern language. About the Father, Spurgeon imagines him to have said: "I, the Most High Jehovah, do hereby give unto my only begotten and well-beloved Son, a people, countless beyond the number of the stars, who shall be by him washed from sin, by him preserved, and kept, and led, and by him, at last presented before my throne, without spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing. I covenant by oath, and swear by myself, because I can swear by no greater, that these whom I now give to Christ shall be for ever the objects of my eternal love. Them will I forgive through the merits of his blood. To these will I give a perfect righteousness; these will I adopt and make my sons and daughters, and these shall reign with me through Christ eternally."

Then it is the Spirit's turn to speak, and He says, "I hereby covenant that all whom the Father giveth to the Son, I will in due time quicken. I will show them their need of redemption; I will cut off from them all groundless hope, and destroy their refuge of lies. I will bring them to the blood of sprinkling; I will give them faith whereby this blood shall be applied to them; I will work in them every grace; I will keep their faith alive; I will cleanse them and drive out all depravity from them, and they shall be presented at last spotless and faultless."

Finally it is the Son's turn to speak, and this is what He says: "My Father, on my part I covenant that in the fullness of time I will become man. I will take upon myself the form and nature of the fallen race. I will live in their wretched world, and for my people I will keep the law perfectly. I will work out a spotless righteousness, which shall be acceptable to the demands of thy just and holy law. In due time I will bear the sins all my people. Thou shalt exact their debts on me; the chastisement of their peaces I will endure, and by my stripes they shall be healed. My Father, I covenant and promise that I will be obedient unto death, even

the death of the cross. I will magnify thy law, and make it honorable. I will suffer all they ought to have suffered. I will endure the curse of thy law, and all the bowls of your wrath shall be emptied and spent upon my head. I will then rise again; I will ascend into heaven; I will intercede for them at thy right hand; and I will make myself responsible for every one of them, that not one of those whom thou hast give me shall ever be lost, but I will bring all my sheep of whom, by thy blood, thou hast constituted me the shepherd—I will bring every one safe to thee at last.”

Are you sprinkled by the blood of Christ? Have your sins been forgiven? If not, then here is a free invitation to come to Jesus Christ, whose blood has been sprinkled upon sinners such as yourself in order that God might forgive your sins, and cleanse you from all iniquity. When that happens, you become married to Jesus Christ. That is why you can now approach the throne of grace. You have been brought near by the blood of the Lamb. You are no enemy to God anymore. Your sin will not keep you away from God anymore, because all your sin is gone.

If you already know God and have your sins forgiven, then draw near to Him. Stand not away from Him. I am convinced that those who despise the worship of God, or use any excuse to keep away from the worship of God are indeed very sick at heart. They might be thinking that their sin once again gets in the way of the relationship between God and man, forgetting that we have forever changed from being God's enemy to being God's child. Or they have let sin change their view of God, and now they see Him as somehow unloving and harsh, and so they do not want more contact with Him. How can we think that, when it is God who provided this forgiveness for us? When it is His own Son who gave His life for us? No, if you are married to God, He will never be unfaithful to you. Draw nigh with confidence and cry out to God as your Father. For the blood of the covenant has been sprinkled upon God's throne and altar, and upon you, if you but believe in Jesus Christ. Read hymn 305.